

that kind of smashing into a future. I took to sf because it was the poetry of my experience. It was the metaphor that spoke best to me – more than any other literature ever had – as to how it felt like to be a southern Californian.”

Robinson has gone on record as saying there are those who don't regard him as a science-fiction writer. Who are these people? “Critics in the field mostly. Up until the Mars trilogy, my books, particularly the ‘California’ novels, have had a different emphasis compared to most sf, I guess. They have less on the technological side of things and more on social relations, characterization and other themes that remind people of mainstream literature. I cannot tell you how many reviews say, ‘This isn't really science fiction but it's good nevertheless.’”

A bizarre reversal of the old mainstream critics' line, “It's a good novel even though it's science fiction.” “Yeah, but I hope it's becoming clearer that I'm committed to this project of writing about the future, which to me makes it science fiction. People can have all kinds of different interests about various aspects of the future and still be science-fiction writers. Some are more interested in the science part of it, which I am often myself, and some in the historical, sociological, personal aspect of it.”

Does this mean he has any interest in getting into writing other kinds of fiction? “Not per se. I feel I'm already right there in the genre that's the most powerful way of describing our current culture. I'm committed to science fiction as being the most vibrant and alive genre going. I'm really very fond of it in literary terms. Sometimes the exclusionary aspect of it, which reinforces the prejudices of those people who won't read books labelled science fiction, is frustrating. But in pure literary terms I feel like I've found the place I'm most comfortable in, and I think it's a powerful field these days.”

*Red Mars* contains ecological, political and social concerns, bearing out Robinson's contention that sf is capable of carrying an agenda, and by implication the belief that the genre can influence people. “That's my working assumption. The reason I have a hunger for more readers is not simply the selfish motive of more books sold equals a more secure living – although that's an important consideration – it also increases the chance to influence people.

“I think science fiction is one of the great subversive forms around today. It's very hard to shock or subvert post-modern society because anything can be eaten by the current commodity-culture machine. It's almost impossible to shock anyone but elements of the population who believe in religious values from a previous time.

Generally speaking you can do practically anything and it's just the event of the week.

“If you really want to influence people, make them think or take them aback, sf is one of the best tools. It's constantly shoving history and the future right in the face of our culture. It says things aren't always going to be like this. It says, ‘You may want to be an ostrich but it's not going to do you any good. The environment's going to change anyway, and the future's coming’.”

The idea of science fiction being radical is practically obsolete these days, I suggest, with many readers complaining that this is the very element the field currently lacks. “You can use science fiction in a couple of different ways,” Robinson responds. “You can use it to escape from reality, simply as a series of daydreams, and unfortunately that's often the case. On the other hand you can use it as a way to try and grapple with this very confusing world we live in, to try to understand it better, in a way to engage it more fully and give one's life more meaning. I much prefer the second, obviously. There's nothing intrinsically bad about it as escapism, but if you go to an extreme in that direction you're mis-using a literature which can be the most powerful tool for creating values.

“One of the biggest hurdles you run across in our present culture is what's called the ‘fact/value problem.’ Which is a way of saying there's the world of facts, which science is so absorbed in and basically represents, and there's the world of the values we believe in and that we learn from religion, literature and psychology. In a secular age, an age in which psychology is looking like a bull in a china shop, literature becomes one of the main repositories of our values. The fact/value problem encapsulates the notion that it isn't at all clear how you can attach values to facts, or how values might arise out of the facts.

“Well, if you've got a literature called science fiction, in a way you've got a genre that's calling itself fact values. There is an attempt in many science-fiction stories to jam together these two basically disjointed parts of our cultural lives, and it's one of the great powers of the form. Just the name of the genre itself is saying to people, ‘We can make this linkage, we can connect values to facts.’ That's one of the reasons I'm so attracted to it.

“When people ask me what I do, I'm not ashamed of saying, ‘I'm a science-fiction writer.’ Over and over again you see a jerk-back of surprise at that. First of all, it's an odd profession; not many people do it. Second, people's conception of science fiction is clearly unsettling. A lot of them say, ‘Oh my gosh,

you do comicbooks or something?’ They have the feeling they know what science fiction is.”

Robinson has found that even the environmental movement has a jaundiced view. “They don't understand science fiction at all. Their notion of sf is that it's technophilic, military-industrial complex stuff, a kind of Pournelle and Niven thing. As if all science fiction is nothing but *Star Wars*. I've encountered some impersonal hostility at environmental conferences because when I'm identified as a science-fiction writer they immediately think of me as the enemy. This shocked me so much I eventually began to collect together a reprint anthology, *Future Primitive*, which contains a number of science-fiction green futures. Anyone familiar with sf knows there's a full ideological spread in the field; there are some luddites, but also people who are very interested in techno-wilderness combinations, ecotopias and so on.

“My view of the field is probably skewed a bit, since I'm inside the picture myself. I have trouble seeing it objectively, and I don't know where the heart of science fiction is any more. But I feel quite strongly that there's some really good stuff being done these days. In fact I would go so far as to say that the golden age of science fiction is probably now. There's a cornucopia of great work being done.”

If only the mainstream critics, the disdainful ones, could be convinced of that. “Yeah, that's the ostrich response again. There are people who, if they were to admit that science fiction includes stuff worthy of their attention, would have to admit also that they've been wrong now for ten, fifteen or twenty years. They would have to admit their ignorance, and that the world is a lot bigger than they thought. Also that the future is real and can be discussed and simulated.

“And that it's scary.”

## CORRECTION

On page 3 of *Interzone* 69 (“Can You Tell Them Apart?”) I referred to **Robert Holdstock's** forthcoming novel, announced in his publisher's catalogue as *The Cathedral*.

Rob informs me that the book has now been put back, from April to August 1993, and the title has been changed. A new novel in his “Mythago” sequence, it will be called *The Hollowing*. HarperCollins are the publishers. A much more intriguing title. Watch out for it.

(DP)

or guest-star roles. Indeed, they are encouraged to do so. The whole point of a shared-world anthology is that it be *shared*. This is one of the things that readers enjoy about it: the consistency, the continuity, the common background. Artistically, I think it's also one of the most interesting things about it.

“These people who do shared-worlds anthologies but don't edit them carefully enough to work out a consistent background for it – they're slapdash things. I don't have much good to say about them. I think if you are going to do a shared world you really have to do your homework. You have to make it function and make the stories fit, eliminate inconsistencies and make the continuity there: all this is the editor's job. The readers are rewarded, I think, with a richer world and more consistent stories – and a better reading experience overall.

“It's an interesting thing for writers to work in too. The shared world is really a new form, and I think very few of the shared-world books have explored that form properly or reached for what it can offer. It's a fascinating experience for a writer to work within There's a dialogue that takes place in fiction – and particularly in science fiction, if you look back through the history – of people replying, in their work, to the works of another writer, a writer of a generation ago. In a shared world, all of that is compressed in one book. You're writing this character and you have a very fixed idea of what he's like in your head. And then someone else picks him up and writes about him. That's a strange experience, the first time it happens. Suddenly you're discovering that what they are writing doesn't necessarily fit what's in your head. So what happened here? Did they get it wrong? But you know this guy, you've been reading him for years and he's a very good writer. Did he get it wrong? Is the character coming across differently from what you imagined he's coming across as? So in some ways it gives you an insight into your own characters. You begin to perceive the character through the other writers, the way the readers are perceiving him, not necessarily the way you are imagining that character.

“There's also that whole dialogue I talked about taking place between writers or generations of writers, that can take place in one book or one story. Book Seven, *Dead Man's Hand*, is a collaboration between myself and John J. Miller. In that story a murder mystery occurs and two characters – my character J. Ackroyd and John's character Brennan – set out to solve the mystery, and we alternate their viewpoints all the way through the book. It's one of our mosaic novels: the most tightly interwoven of the shared-world forms, I think, and one that we originated.

“The climax of the book works, I think, because the two main characters are very different. I mean, Brennan is a vigilante. He's killed hundreds of men. He believes that the system doesn't work and that the only way an individual can get justice is by meting it out himself, so to speak. He has no hesitation in killing his enemies. My character, Ackroyd, is by comparison almost a pacifist. His teleportation power can inconvenience and imprison, but doesn't kill, his enemies and he doesn't carry a gun. He doesn't approve of violence.

“The clash between these two men ... you know, if I had been writing the book I could have put a character like Brennan in it, and there maybe would have been a little argument at the end. But my character would have won, right? And if John had been writing it the reverse would have happened – the character like mine would have been brushed aside. Instead, it was like negotiating the Paris Peace Accords here, especially since Melinda Snodgrass's character Doctor Tachyon was in the scene and we're both having to consult her. It becomes very complex. But I also think that it reads better than if John or I had done that alone, because it reads the way two people holding opposite views really would argue about it. It wouldn't just be boom boom boom, argument's over, one guy loses. Nobody convinces anybody. I mean, these two guys go in feeling certain things and they leave – both of them have changed – but they leave still feeling certain things. A shared world can do that, if it's properly run.”

Martin is obviously very enthusiastic about shared worlds. He's careful to draw a distinction between them and share-cropping, where a (usually) newer writer does a novel set in a more famous writer's pre-established universe: “It really gets me annoyed when shared worlds get bracketed with share-cropping or leased worlds, as I call them. I mean, when you have Andre Norton inviting a bunch of people to do a *Witch World* book or Isaac Asimov farming out the robots, these are not true shared worlds. This is like: ‘This is mine, you can come in, you can play here a little bit, but don't change anything, don't move anything: it belongs to me.’ That's the share-crop situation. A shared world is a group of very strong, idiosyncratic individualists coming together, each with their own moral system and their own style and their own ways of writing, and collectively hammering out a shared background, and setting very different kinds of characters into motion, to clash within it – and collectively owning the whole thing. So it's not my sandbox, it's everybody's sandbox. When you own a piece of it I think you are a little more

committed than the people who do these franchised operations.”

So much for writing collectively. Martin's other big recent project was the *Beauty and the Beast* television series – but that's another story.

Those of us who miss his own, unalloyed, work will be glad to know he's working on a new fantasy novel. Just what it's about we'll have to wait and see – Martin isn't telling.

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and

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